

Changing the World, One Leader at a Time

By Wayne Visser

We face a crisis of leadership. Our global challenges loom large and clear, but we seem to lack leaders who can make change happen at a scale and speed that match the size and urgency of the problems we face. In an attempt to understand this leadership impasse, I've done some research with the University of Cambridge's Programme for Sustainability Leadership on how change happens. In this blog, I'll briefly outline some of our conclusions.

Let's start with what kind of change we're talking about. Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, observes that companies that went from being 'good to great' did not rely on revolutions, dramatic change programmes or wrenching restructurings. 'Rather, the process resembled relentlessly pushing a giant flywheel in one direction, turn upon turn, building momentum until a point of breakthrough, and beyond.'

So we're talking about catalysing and scaling up change. And for this change to be successful, leaders need to foster and entrench new values, culture, incentives, rules and resources. In Accenture and the UN Global Compact's 2010 survey, 54% of CEOs felt that a cultural tipping point on sustainability is only a decade away—and 80% believe it will occur within 15 years, so perhaps we are nearing a moment of infectious change. Meanwhile, at the organisational level, leaders must catalyse change for sustainability through a suite of actions, including innovation, empowerment, accountability, closed-loop practices and collaboration.

We found that effective sustainability leaders are good at promoting creativity in business models, technology, products and services that address social and environmental challenges. Sustainability leaders also implement structures and processes for good governance, transparency and stakeholder engagement.

Accountability does not have to be all about structures and controls however. Collins believes great leaders foster a culture of discipline, saying 'When you have disciplined people, you don't need hierarchy. When you have disciplined thought, you don't need bureaucracy. When you have disciplined action, you don't need excessive controls'. According to Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of G.E., 'Enron and 9/11 marked the end of an era of individual freedom and the beginning of personal responsibility. You lead today by building teams and placing others first. It's not about you.'

The best sustainability leaders adopt principles of cradle-to-cradle production, internalising externalities and extending these principles to the supply chain. Sustainability leaders also build formal cross-sector partnerships, as well as innovative and inclusive collaborative processes such as social networking (Web 2.0). Betty Sue Flowers, co-author of *Presence*, poses the challenge as a question, saying, 'We know a lot about heroic action because that's in the past of leadership. But how do you have leadership in groups across boundaries, multi-nationally?'

At the people level, leaders catalyse change for sustainability by providing a compelling vision, encouraging long term thinking, making strategic investments and promoting intergenerational equity. Immelt says 'every leader needs to clearly explain the top three things the organization is working on. If you can't, then you're not leading well.' Ray Anderson, the late CEO of Interface, saw this as a process of inclusion, saying, 'For Interface, sustainability is broader than before: sustainability reaches out to embrace people, processes, products, place, the planet and profits - we now know that none can long be afforded allegiance at the expense of the others.'

Sustainability leaders have to deep knowledge and skills and provide opportunities and resources for appropriate action. This embraces Robert Greenleaf notion of servant leadership. He explains that 'It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire

to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?’

Transformational sustainability leaders also focus on creating a culture and structure that provides peer support and encouragement and recognises achievement. Immelt says, ‘Today, it’s employment at will. Nobody’s here who doesn’t want to be here. So it’s critical to understand people, to always be fair, and to want the best in them.’

In the end, I believe the best leaders are effective storytellers. And they realise that we need a new collective story. As I wrote in *Beyond Reasonable Greed*, ‘each time the world changes – when civilizations rise and fall, when new scientific theories challenge our understanding of the universe, when technological innovation reinvents our lifestyle, when political revolution breaks down the old structures of society, or when a global crisis threatens to destroy our planet – humanity is forced to let go of some of its most cherished beliefs in order to create a new mythology to guide its collective psyche.’

We are at just such a fulcrum of change, and the beliefs we need to challenge and modify are many. Maybe it is our belief in the beneficence of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market. Or our belief that a global political deal is all we need to solve the climate crisis. Or that that business has the power to act unilaterally in bringing about a more sustainable and responsible future.

If my experience of living through the political changes in South Africa has taught me anything, it is that change is systemic. It happens because of millions of small actions by millions of people all over the world, some co-ordinated, some diffuse. Yes, change also happens because of bold leadership, but it always needs an enabling environment, a society or an organisation that is ready to change.

Change is something organic. It is worth remembering that the largest living thing in the world is a honey mushroom in Oregon – an interconnected fungus measuring 3.5 miles across. It is said to be 2,400 years old and takes up 2,200 acres (1,665 football fields), with the small mushrooms visible above ground representing only a tiny proportion of its real girth and substance. I think change is something like that too: spread out, interconnected, growing where the ground is most fertile ground and often invisible.

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